



# Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture

*Bram Dijkstra*

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## **Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture** Bram Dijkstra

In the years around 1900, an unprecedented attack on women erupted in virtually every aspect of culture: literary, artistic, scientific, and philosophic. Many of the anti-feminine platitudes that today still constrain women's potential were first formulated during this period, as intellectuals of every stripe throughout Europe and America banded together to picture women as static and unindividuated beings whose sole function was sexual and reproductive.

*Idols of Perversity* explores the nature and development of turn-of-the-century misogyny in the works of hundreds of writers, artists, and scientists, including such figures as Zola, Strindberg, Wedekind, Henry James, Rossetti, Renoir, Maurois, Klimt, Darwin, and Spencer, not to mention a host of now-forgotten others. As Bram Dijkstra shows, justification for this wave of anti-feminine sentiment was sought in the most prejudicial aspects of Evolutionary Theory. It was held that the female of the species had not been able to participate in the great evolutionary process that was guiding the intellectual male, nature's chosen "superman," to his ultimate, predistined role as a disembodied spiritual essence. Women were seen as a hindrance to the smooth unfolding of this process, ready at any moment to lure men back to a sham paradise of erotic materiality. To protect the male's continued evolution, there came a flood of pseudo-scientific tracts, novels, and paintings in which artists and intellectuals sought to warn the world's males of the evils lying beneath the surface elegance of woman's tempting skin.

Reproducing hundreds of pictures from the period and including in-depth discussions of such key works as *Dracula* and *Venus in Furs*, this fascinating book not only exposes the crucial links between misogyny then and now but connects it to the racism and anti-semitism that led to catastrophic genocidal delusions in the first half of the twentieth century. Crossing the conventional boundaries of art history, sociology, the history of scientific theory, and literary analysis, Dijkstra unveils a startling view of women--a war whose battles are still being fought.

About the Author:

Bram Dijkstra is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego, and author of *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, *A Recognizable Image*, and other works on literature and the visual arts.

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